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THE LATINISMS IN SHAKESPEARE'S DICTION¹

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I use the term Latinisms to indicate words of Latin derivation which in Shakespeare have a meaning different from the modern English meaning of the same words, and closely approximating the sense of the Latin originals. Although I had long observed that Shakespeare often used words of Latin origin with what appeared to be a singularly clear consciousness of the force of the Latin stems, my attention was particularly drawn to this subject by my experience a few years ago in giving a course in Shakespeare to a class of college age. In this course, which was to a certain extent modelled upon one given at Harvard by my own honored Shakespeare teacher, Professor Kittredge, six plays were studied in considerable detail and my endeavor was to have the students understand with some precision the actual meaning of the poet's words. In making this attempt I found myself continually directing attention to the force of the Latin words from which the words in the text were derived, and this led me to investigate the whole subject of the poet's Latinisms.

Of the abundant material with which my search has been rewarded, the time at my disposal in this paper will permit me to give only an *aperçu*. The divergence from the modern meaning varies from instances in which the word has a slightly weakened significance in present-day English to those in which the Shakespearean meaning is the exact opposite of the modern.

A good illustration of the former type of Latinism occurs in *Romeo and Juliet* (III, v, 48 ff.), where Romeo says:

Farewell!
I will omit no opportunity
That may convey my greetings, love, to thee.

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Here one might perhaps at first think there was no difference from the modern meaning of the word "opportunity." In fact, however, "opportunity" in Shakespeare means more than it does now; it is closer to the original force of Latin *opportunus*, and means "a specially favorable occasion." Romeo was just about to flee to Mantua and it was going to be rather difficult for him to get messages to Juliet in the house of the Capulets at Verona. We miss a delicate shade of the poet's meaning if we fail to feel the force of Latin *opportunus* in Romeo's "opportunity." Of the extreme cases where, in Shakespeare, a word actually means the opposite of what it does now, a picturesque example is found in *Richard II* (I, i, 62-66):

Which to maintain I would allow him odds,
And meet him, were I tied to run afoot,
Even to the frozen ridges of the Alps,
Or any other ground inhabitable
Wherever Englishman durst set his foot—

"inhabitable" in this passage meaning what we should now call "uninhabitable."

LATIN-FRENCH WORDS

An interesting group of words are those which Shakespeare uses in a sense different from the modern English meaning, but identical with the modern French use. So "demand," French *demandeur*, "ask":

Well demanded, wench:
My tale provokes that question [*Tempest*, I, ii, 139-40].

Besides, to be demanded of a sponge, what replication should be made by the son of a king? [*Hamlet*, IV, ii, 12].

Laertes: Where is my father?
King: Dead.
Queen: But not by him.
King: Let him demand his fill [*Hamlet*, IV, v, 127-28].

So the noun "demand" in the sense of "question":

Niggard of question, but of our demands
Most free in his reply [*Hamlet*, III, i, 13-14].

“Assist,” French *assister*, “be present.” Compare English “assist” as a social term (at a party, a hostess):

The king and prince at prayers! let’s assist them,
For our case is as theirs [*Tempest*, I, i, 57-58].

“Meager” French *maigre*, “thin”:

meagre were his looks,
Sharp misery had worn him to the bones [*Romeo and Juliet*, V, i, 40-41].

“Savage,” French *sauvage*, “wild”:

If this uncouth forest yield anything savage, I will either be food for it or bring it for food to thee [*As You Like It*, II, vi, 6-8].

“Eager,” French *aigre* (Latin *acer*), “sharp,” “sour.”

Ham.: The air bites shrewdly; it is very cold.

Hor.: It is a nipping and an eager air [*Hamlet*, I, iv, 1-2].

And curd, like eager droppings into milk [*Hamlet*, I, v, 69].

WORDS NOW RESTRICTED TO A SPECIAL USE

Many words of Latin origin are now restricted to a special use, which Shakespeare employs in a more general signification, closely dependent on their Latin originals. Thus he uses both the noun “censure” in the sense of “judgment,” “opinion,” and the verb “censure” in the sense of “judge,” “think of” (Latin *censeo*, “think,” “judge”), without any notion of fault-finding.

Give every man thy ear, but few thy voice;
Take each man’s censure, but reserve thy judgment [*Hamlet*, I, iii, 68-69].

Their virtues else

Shall in the general censure take corruption
From that particular fault [*Hamlet*, I, iv, 33-36].

Give him heedful note;
For I mine eyes will rivet to his face,
And after we will both our judgments join
In censure of his seeming [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 89 ff.].

Do you two know how you are censured here in the city, I mean of us o’ the right-hand file? Do you?

Why, how are we censured? [*Coriolanus*, II, i, 23 ff.].

This original Latin sense of the word survives in “censor” as a military term, i.e., “judge” (though to some of us perhaps his

recent activities may have seemed at times to verge on the *censorious*).

So "eruption," "a bursting forth," in general (now restricted for the most part to eruptions of the skin, or of volcanoes).

In what particular thought to work I know not;
But in the gross and scope of my opinion,
This bodes some strange eruption to our state [*Hamlet*, I, i, 67-69].

"Distilled," "melted" (now confined to one or two technical uses):

. . . . distill'd

Almost to jelly with the act of fear [*Hamlet*, I, ii, 204-5].

"Digress," "go apart" (from the right way), now restricted to the literary use:

This deadly blot in thy digressing son [*Richard II*, V, iii, 66].

"Sacrament," "an oath" (Latin *sacramentum*, a military oath; now restricted to its religious signification):

A dozen of them here have ta'en the sacrament,
And interchangeably set down their hands,
To kill the king at Oxford [*Richard II*, V, ii, 97-99].

"Image," "likeness," in general (Latin *imago*; now mostly restricted to a likeness in the round):

Of any thing the image tell me, that
Hath kept with thy remembrance [*Tempest*, I, ii, 43-44].

Compare "she's the very image of her mother."

"Election," "choice," in general (now restricted to choice by vote):

Since my dear soul was mistress of her choice
And could of men distinguish, her election
Hath seal'd thee for herself [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 64-66].

"Affections," "tendencies" (now confined to feelings of love or friendship):

Love! his affections do not that way tend [*Hamlet*, III, i, 166].

"Accident," "happening," good or bad (Latin *accido*; now mostly confined to unpleasant happenings):

Grief joys, joy grieves, on slender accident [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 193].

This general meaning of the word is still preserved in the phrase "by accident," as:

That he, as 't were by accident, may here
Afront Ophelia [*Hamlet*, III, i, 30-31].

"Respective," "considerate" (cf. Latin *respicio*; now almost technical in use):

Away to heaven, respective lenity,
And fire-eyed fury be my conduct now! [*Romeo and Juliet*, III, i, 126-27.]

So "crescent" in the sense of "growing," and practically with the force of a Latin participle:

For nature, crescent, does not grow alone
In thews and bulk, but as this temple waxes,
The inward service of the mind and soul
Grows wide withhold [*Hamlet*, I, iii, 11-14].

Compare the use with similar participial force of "credent," "believing":

If with too credent ear you list his songs [*Hamlet*, I, iii, 30].

Similar instances are the following:

"Investments," "clothing":

Not of that dye which their investments show [*Hamlet*, I, iii, 128].

(Cf. 2 *Henry IV*, IV, i, 45: "white investments.") We still speak of the vestments of a priest.

"Conscience," "inward reflection," "self-communing" (in Hamlet's famous soliloquy):

Thus conscience does make cowards of us all [*Hamlet*, III, i, 83].

In another passage in the same play, "conscience" seems to mean "consciousness of guilt" rather than quite the modern sense of the word:

the play's the thing
Wherein I'll catch the conscience of the king [*Hamlet*, II, ii, 641-42].

"Occulted," "hidden" (now confined to the technical use in astronomy):

if his occulted guilt
Do not itself unkennel in one speech [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 82-83].

“Empire,” “sovereignty,” “rule,” in general (Latin *imperium*):

A cut-purse of the empire and the rule [*Hamlet*, III, iv, 97].

and the moist star

Upon whose influence Neptune's empire stands [*Hamlet*, I, i, 118–19].

“Declension,” “a bending down,” in general (now restricted to the technical use with which most of us are tolerably, if not intolerably, familiar):

Thence to a watch, thence into a weakness,

Thence to a lightness, and by this declension

Into the madness wherein now he raves [*Hamlet*, II, ii, 148–50].

WORDS USED BY SHAKESPEARE IN A LITERAL SENSE WHERE THE MODERN ENGLISH USAGE IS FIGURATIVE

In Shakespeare's English many words are employed in the literal sense of the Latin words from which they are derived, while in modern English the same words bear a figurative meaning. This fact sometimes leads to serious misapprehensions of the poet's meaning, as, for instance, in the much-quoted line:

Assume a virtue, if you have it not.

“Assume” in this passage does not mean, as is often supposed, “hypocritically pretend” to a virtue that you do not possess. Rather Hamlet's admonition to his mother means, as the context shows, “take to yourself” (Latin *ad sumo*), i.e., “practise virtue,” and thus becomes both good morals and good psychology.

A striking example of the vividness with which Shakespeare often seems to conceive the root meaning of words of Latin origin occurs in *Coriolanus*, Act I, scene i:

. . . . the leanness that afflicts us, the object of our misery, is as an inventory to particularise their abundance,

where “object” means “the throwing in their way” of our misery.

In the same play occurs an excellent illustration of the use, not uncommon in other plays, also, of “sensible” in the meaning “capable of feeling”:

Come; I would your cambric were sensible as your finger, that you might leave pricking it for pity [*Coriolanus*, I, iii, 94–96].

Compare *Coriolanus*, Act I, scene iv:

O, noble fellow!

Who, sensible, outdares his senseless sword,

and *Hamlet*, I, i, 56-58:

Before my God, I might not this believe
Without the sensible and true avouch
Of mine own eyes.

So Shakespeare uses "process" in the literal sense of "what goes forward":

My lord, he's going to his mother's closet.
Behind the arras I'll convey myself,
To hear the process [*Hamlet*, III, iii, 27-29].

Other instances of his use of words in the literal Latin sense, rather than in the modern figurative meaning, are the following:

"Prime," "first":

my prime request,
Which I do last pronounce, is, O you wonder!
If you be maid or no? [*Tempest*, I, ii, 425-27].

"Prevent," "come before," "anticipate," rather than "hinder":

Guildenstern: My lord, we were sent for.

Hamlet: I will tell you why; so shall my anticipation prevent your discovery, and your secrecy to the king and queen moult no feather [*Hamlet*, II, ii, 304 ff.].

Here even the commentators are sometimes misled, as Hudson, for instance, says, in his note on this passage: "The whole passage seems to mean, 'my anticipation shall prevent your discovering to me the purpose of your visit, and so your promise of secrecy will be perfectly kept.'" "Prevent" is, on the other hand, correctly explained by Rolfe, *ad loc.*, who compares *Julius Caesar* (V, i, 105): "to prevent The time of life." We may compare also the use of "prevent" in the Book of Common Prayer, "as by thy special grace preventing us thou dost put into our minds good desires" (the Collect for Easter), and the theological term "prevenient grace."

"Extravagant," "wandering beyond bounds";

"Erring," "wandering":

and at his warning,

Whether in sea or fire, in earth or air,
The extravagant and erring spirit hies
To his confine [*Hamlet*, I, i, 152-55].

“Horridly,” “in a shuddering manner” (from Latin *horridus*, “bristly, shuddering”):

and we fools of nature
So horridly to shake our disposition
With thoughts beyond the reaches of our souls? [*Hamlet*, I, iv, 54–56].

“Manage,” “handle,” literally:

put up thy sword,
Or manage it to part these men with me [*Romeo and Juliet*, I, i, 74–75].

“Obey,” “listen attentively” (Latin *obedire*):

The hour's now come;
The very minute bids thee ope thine ear;
Obey, and be attentive [*Tempest*, I, ii, 36–38].

“Decline,” “bend down”:

He takes her up, and declines his head upon her neck [*Hamlet*, III, ii, dumb-show].

Compare *Coriolanus* (II, i, 174) and compare “declension,” above.

“Resolve,” “loosen,” “break up,” “melt”:

Thaw, and resolve itself into a dew! [*Hamlet*, I, ii, 130].

WORDS THAT HAVE CHANGED THEIR APPLICATION OR USE

Many words have changed their application or use since Shakespeare's time to such a degree that the poet's meaning would often be quite unintelligible unless we have recourse to the original Latin significance. So the word “nerve” in Shakespeare usually, and, I think, always, means “sinew,” like its Latin original. Thus Hamlet says:

As hardy as the Nemean lion's nerve [I, iv, 83],

and Prospero says to Ferdinand, whom he has charmed so that he cannot move:

Come on; obey:
Thy nerves are in their infancy again,
And have no vigour in them.
[*Tempest*, I, ii, 483–85; cf. *Coriolanus*, I, i, 139].

For this use of the word we may compare the lines in a familiar early eighteenth-century hymn:

Awake, my soul, stretch every nerve
And press with vigour on,

and also the phrase occasionally heard in ordinary conversation, "strain every nerve."

The adjective "nervy" Shakespeare employs in the corresponding sense in a splendid line:

Death, that dark spirit, in's nervy arm doth lie,
Which, being advanc'd, declines, and then men die [*Coriolanus*, II, i, 173-74].

Of the multitude of words that have "suffered a sea-change" in the tide of centuries since Shakespeare, the following are important instances:

"Generosity," "noble birth":

With these shreds
They vented their complainings; which being answer'd,
And a petition granted them, a strange one,
(To break the heart of generosity,
And make bold power look pale) they threw their caps
As they would hang them on the horns o' the moon,
Shouting their emulation [*Coriolanus*, I, i, 209-15].

Hudson in his note on this passage says, "Generosity, in the sense of its Latin original, for nobleness, high birth." So Johnson, cited by Rolfe, on "To break the heart of generosity": "To give the final blow to the *nobles*. *Generosity is high birth.*" Steevens compares "generous" in *Measure for Measure*, IV, vi, 13: "The generous and gravest citizens."

"Clamor," "shouting" (of the human voice, the original Latin meaning, as distinguished from the modern meaning of an indiscriminate noise):

and from this time,
For what he did before Corioli, call him,
With all the applause and clamour of the host,
Caius Marcius Coriolanus! [*Coriolanus*, I, ix, 62-65].

"Comment," "observation," "earnest thought" (Latin *comminiscor*):

I prithee, when thou seest that act afoot,
Even with the very comment of thy soul
Observe mine uncle [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 79-81].

"Vulgar," "common":

For what we know must be and is as common
As any the most vulgar thing to sense [*Hamlet*, I, ii, 98-99].

“Absurd,” “contrary to reason”:

To reason most absurd [*Hamlet*, I, ii, 103].

“Comfortable,” “strengthening” (cf. Latin *fortis*; late Latin *confortare*, strengthen):

Vol.: I pray you, daughter, sing; or express yourself in a more comfortable sort [*Coriolanus*, I, iii, 1-2].

Juliet (*just awakening in the tomb*): O comfortable friar! where is my lord? [*Romeo and Juliet*, V, iii, 148].

Compare the phrase in the Book of Common Prayer (Exhortation to the Communion), “the most comfortable Sacrament of the Body and Blood of Christ”; and below (Exhortation to the Communion), “to be our spiritual food and sustenance in that holy Sacrament. Which being so divine and comfortable a thing to them who receive it worthily”; and “Hear what comfortable words our Saviour Christ saith unto all who truly turn to him,” Book of Common Prayer, The Communion.

“Civil,” “of the citizens” (Latin *civilis*):

Where civil blood makes civil hands unclean [*Romeo and Juliet*, Prol. 4].

This meaning of “civil” is retained in modern English in one or two phrases, especially, Civil War.

“Doctrine,” “teaching” (Latin *doctrina*):

Romeo: Farewell; thou canst not teach me to forget.

Benvolio: I'll pay that doctrine, or else die in debt [*Romeo and Juliet*, I, i, 234-35].

“Fugitive,” “deserter” (Latin *fugitivus*):

But let the world rank me in register

A master-leaver, and a fugitive [*Antony and Cleopatra*, IV, ix, 22-23].

“Conceit,” “imagination,” “idea” (from Latin *concipere*, through Old French *concevoir*):

Thy conceit is nearer death than thy powers [*As You Like It*, II, vi, 8].

The horrible conceit of death and night [*Romeo and Juliet*, IV, iii, 38].

O, step between her and her fighting soul;

Conceit in weakest bodies strongest works [*Hamlet*, III, iv, 111-12].

Conceit upon her father [*of Ophelia*] [*Hamlet*, IV, v, 46].

“Admiration,” “astonishment” (Latin *admirari*):

Hamlet: my mother, you say,—

Rosencrantz: Then thus she says: your behaviour hath struck her into amazement and admiration.

Hamlet: O wonderful son, that can so astonish a mother! But is there no sequel at the heels of this mother's admiration? [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 318 ff.].

So, probably, “admirable,” “wonderful” (rather than the modern sense of the word) in:

What a piece of work is man! in form and moving how express and admirable! [*Hamlet*, II, ii, 300],

and “admired,” “wondered at”:

Admir'd Miranda!

Indeed the top of admiration [*Tempest*, III, i, 37-38].

Compare:

O you wonder! [*Tempest*, I, ii, 426].

“Admire,” “wonder”:

‘wonder not, nor admire not in thy mind’ [*Twelfth Night*, III, iv, 165].

I perceive, these lords

At this encounter do so much admire
That they devour their reason, and scarce think
Their eyes do offices of truth, their words
Are natural breath [*Tempest*, V, i, 153 ff.].

“Presently,” “immediately”:

Should presently extirpate me and mine
Out of the dukedom [*Tempest*, I, ii, 125-26].

Compare *Tempest*, IV, i, 41 ff.:

Prospero: it is my promise,
And they expect it from me.

Ariel: Presently?

Prospero: Ay, with a twink.

And so frequently in Shakespeare. The change of meaning that “presently” has undergone in modern English reminds one of the similar change in the significance of *ἀμέως* in modern Greek.

“Present,” “immediate”:

Our sovereign process; which imports at full,
By letters conjuring to that effect,
The present death of Hamlet [*Hamlet*, IV, iii, 66-68].

“Proper,” “characteristic,” “belonging to” (Latin *proprius*):
but besrew my jealousy!

By heaven, it is as proper to our age
To cast beyond ourselves in our opinions
As it is common for the younger sort
To lack discretion [*Hamlet*, II, i, 113 ff.].

“Proper” is here wrongly explained by Rolfe as meaning “appropriate.”

So “property,” “character”:

This is the very ecstasy of love,
Whose violent property fordoes itself [*Hamlet*, II, i, 102-3].

“Conversation,” “intercourse” (Latin *conversari*):

Horatio, thou art e'en as just a man
As e'er my conversation cop'd withal [*Hamlet*, III, ii, 55-56].

“Humorous,” “damp”:

To be consorted with the humorous night [perhaps with a play on the other meaning, “capricious”] [*Romeo and Juliet*, II, i, 29].

Compare “humor,” “liquid”:

When presently through all thy veins shall run
A cold and drowsy humour [*Romeo and Juliet*, IV, i, 95-96].

“Virtue,” “valor” (Latin *virtus*):

He did it to please his mother, and to be partly proud; which he is, even to the altitude of his virtue [*Coriolanus*, I, i, 39-41].

Compare *Coriolanus*, II, ii, 83 ff.:

It is held
That valour is the chiefest virtue, and
Most dignifies the haver.

“Affront,” “come face to face with” (cf. Latin *frons*):

For we have closely sent for Hamlet hither,
That he, as 't were by accident, may here
Affront Ophelia [*Hamlet*, III, i, 29-31].

WORDS IN WHICH THE FORCE OF THE LATIN SUFFIX IS STILL FELT

In some Shakespearean words the force of the Latin suffix is more distinctly felt than in modern English. Hamlet says of his father that he had:

A station like the herald Mercury
New-lighted on a heaven-kissing hill [III, iv, 58-59].

Here the word "station" has by no means so "stationary" a meaning as it has in present-day English, but means rather, like its Latin original *statio*, "the act of standing," "manner of standing."

So the force of the Latin suffix *-osus* is still clearly felt in the poet's use of "gracious" and "ungracious," as in *Hamlet*, I, i, 158 ff.:

Some say that ever 'gainst that season comes
Wherein our Saviour's birth is celebrated,
The bird of dawning singeth all night long;
And then, they say, no spirit can walk abroad;
The nights are wholesome; then no planets strike,
No fairy takes, nor witch hath power to charm,
So hallow'd and so gracious is the time—

"gracious" meaning "full of grace" (in the religious sense); and *Hamlet*, I, iii, 46 ff.:

But, good my brother,
Do not, as some ungracious pastors do,
Show me the steep and thorny way to heaven,
Whiles, like a puff'd and reckless libertine,
Himself the primrose path of dalliance treads,
And recks not his own rede,

where "ungracious" signifies "not full of grace."

Other instances of the living force of the Latin suffix are "implorators" (a word not, I think, in use in modern English):

But mere implorators of unholy suits [*Hamlet*, I, iii, 129],
and "moment" in the sense of "means of moving" (Latin-*mentum*):

I have seen her die twenty times upon far poorer moment [*Antony and Cleopatra*, I, ii, 150 ff.].

WORDS NOW OBSOLETE

Not a few Shakespearean words of Latin origin are obsolete in modern English. The meaning of these is usually clear to one who is acquainted with Latin. The following may suffice as illustrations of such obsolete words:

"Reneg," "deny" (Latin *negare*):¹

His captain's heart,
Which in the scuffles of great fights hath burst
The buckles on his breast, reneges all temper [*Antony and Cleopatra*, I, i, 6-8].

¹ "Reneg" is still in use in the United States as a technical term in card-playing.

“Muniments,” “defenses” (Latin *munimentum*):

Our steed the leg, the tongue our trumpeter,
With other muniments and petty helps
In this our fabric [*Coriolanus*, I, i, 118-20].

Compare the modern “munitions.”

“Precurse,” “harbinger” (Latin *praecurrere*):

And even the like precurse of fierce events,
As harbingers preceding still the fates [*Hamlet*, I, i, 124-25].

Other equally interesting examples of Shakespeare's Latinisms might be cited, if space allowed; but enough, I hope, have been given to show that, in spite of Jonson's dictum about the poet's “small Latin,” Shakespeare had a very nice sense of the meaning of Latin stems, and to suggest the probability that the youthful poet had acquired a considerable acquaintance with Latin in the Stratford Grammar School. It seems certain, at all events, that a good knowledge of Latin is indispensable to the Shakespeare teacher and very desirable for anybody who would read Shakespeare understandingly.